

What Unitarians Fear

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How many of you listen to NPR? (show of hands) Right...so you probably know they've just finished their annual fundraising event, the "fall fundraising drive." You can't avoid it, they replace their regular programming with people asking for money.

Raise your hand if you've given money to NPR?

Raise your hand if you have a coffee mug, or some other item, with the NPR logo on it?

When I was asked to deliver a sermon just before Halloween, I had to think for a while to think of a way to connect Unitarian Universalist to Halloween. It might be a bit of a stretch, but here it goes. An important element of Halloween is frightening people. And in a very real way, a lot of religions are designed to help people handle very deep-seated fears.

For example: Many people are religious because they're afraid of hell and eternal damnation. An entire genre of sermons are known as the "fire and brimstone" sermon: Repent your sins and believe, or else you will burn in hell for eternity! Now *that* is pretty scary.

And that is a pretty strong motivation to join a church and believe in their doctrine: if you are a believing member of the church, you won't go to hell.

In contrast, Unitarians and Universalists don't have much to be afraid of—theologically, at least. I've never met a UU who comes to our church because of fear. You are not here because you're afraid that if you miss church, you'll go to hell. In a way, that's a challenge for our faith: There's no punishment if you stay at home on Sunday. You won't go to hell. In fact, there's no eternal damnation if you don't belong to our church. You won't go to hell.

In other churches, people stay attached, in part, because of a fear of hell. And that's not the only fear that fills the pews. There's the fear of sinning, the fear of being a sinner in the eyes of God. Most Christian faiths believe that all human beings are sinners. They believe that there is no way to be perfect and to avoid all sin. And as we know, "the wages of sin is death." To sin, to be a sinner, means you are on the highway to hell.

In the early 19th century, the doctrine of Universalism emerged specifically to reject this belief in human sin, original sin. Universalists believe that Jesus's death and resurrection saved all humanity, and that as a result, we

are all going to heaven—whether or not we personally accept and believe in Jesus Christ as our savior, whether or not we have even heard of Jesus Christ.

And today's Unitarian Universalists retain this happy, optimistic, fear-free belief. Of course, we always strive to be better people. Other things being equal, not sinning is better than sinning, right? We strive to grow, to serve others more effectively, to be a positive force for good in the world. We know that human beings are fallible, that no one is perfect. But the awareness of human imperfection doesn't make us run to church; it just makes us respect and understand others.

Not being afraid is a good thing. We don't believe in a vengeful God. We don't believe that humans are sinners who need a superhuman deity to be saved; we believe that we must save ourselves.

So do Unitarians really fear anything?

I can think of at least two things.

Number one. I humbly suggest that we may be somewhat afraid of *commitment*. Specifically, we are afraid of commitment to a church.

I myself am an example of this aversion to commitment. After I'd been attending this church for about three years, I still hadn't signed the membership book. For the record, yes, I've now signed the book. But it didn't occur to me to do it until I was approached about being one of our elected officers.

Everyone makes their own choice; that is what we believe. And I can imagine plenty of good reasons not to sign the book. But I suggest that one potential explanation is this fear of commitment.

In many other churches, joining the church is a dramatic and transformative act.

You become born again.

You become baptized in the spirit.

You become a completely different type of spiritual being. In a theological sense, you can never go back.

Our church isn't like that. Signing the book is a very simple action. We don't believe that it changes you forever. We don't believe it raises you to a higher spiritual plane. We don't believe that you become saved and born again.

You know what that means? It means that it's easy to leave. The cost of commitment to First Unitarian is much lower than in these other churches. If you change your mind in a few years, we will bless you on your way.

So why be afraid? I think we're still afraid, even of this relatively low level of commitment, because it might lead to us being *controlled* by some other person or group. We are afraid of restricting our freedom, of losing our autonomy. Many of us came to First Unitarian after running away from churches

that told us what to think and what to do and how to be. You might have struggled to get out of some other church, perhaps the church of your childhood or our family. And as a result, you associate religious commitment with the sort of belief you want to leave behind.

We are independent, free thinkers. We value this independence. But if we are too afraid of commitment, it can block our spiritual path forward. Here's why.

Our theology is about creating community. And there's no community without commitment. Every group of human beings asks the same questions of each other: Are you in, or not? Are you all in, or just passing through?

I gave a sermon back in 2010, about the large body of research showing the relative success of strict churches. They're more successful because they do a better job of creating commitment and community. Yes, there's a cost to commitment; but you're repaid many times over in the powerful community that it creates.

We need commitment because we need community. A community that challenges you to grow, a loving community that supports you through life's challenges.

Commitment involves some very specific actions: It means you pledge money to support the work of the church. It means you attend services regularly. In general UUs get bad grades for church attendance; in a recent study of church attendance across denominations, UUs are at the very bottom: on average, a member attends just ten services each year! And it means you identify yourself with First Unitarian Church: You now say "I am a Unitarian Universalist." Of course, I know that we have many committed members of this church who are "all in," who are deeply committed to our work and our purpose. Who identify as a member of this church.

This last point, identifying with the church, leads me to a second fear. Even for those of us who are deeply committed to First Unitarian, I believe that we have another even deeper fear: we are afraid of *evangelism*. We are afraid of *telling people about Unitarian Universalism*. Raise your hand if:

- You have a coffee mug, or some other item, that says Unitarian Universalist or First Unitarian Church?
- You have a bumper sticker on your car that says Unitarian Universalism, or First Unitarian Church?
- You wear a lapel pin, or jewelry, with the UU logo?
- You have a sign posted in your yard with the name of our church on it? I didn't expect any hands for this one. But in my neighborhood near Belleville, Illinois, many churchgoers keep a sign in their front yard (it looks sort of like a political campaign sign) displaying the name of their church.

Okay. So most of us don't have any of these items.

But a lot of you DO have similar items for NPR! By the way, how many of us have brought up an NPR story at a party? I know I have, more than once. But think about this: How many of us have brought up the minister's sermon at a cocktail party?

How many of you have been at a party and mentioned your church, your involvement in the church?

I have to admit, this has been hard for me. At my workplace, Washington University, I'm surrounded by very highly educated and mostly secular colleagues. We don't have bible-beating people working there. My colleagues are more likely to be "post church," atheists or agnostics. And I have to admit, I've always been a bit afraid to let them know my secret: That I actually attend a church!

Let me tell you a story. I started working at Washington University in 1996. My department chair and my mentor, the man who hired me, was and is an important influence in my life. He's been to parties at my house, and I've been to his house many times. When I first came to a service here at First Unitarian in 2006, I was surprised to see him here. His name is Jim Wertsch, a name many of our longtime members will recognize, because Jim and Mary Wertsch were established members of our church. They raised their two boys in this church. And yet, the topic of church simply never came up between Jim and I at work or in social settings.

In my neighborhood of Swansea, Illinois, most of the parents of my son's friends are Christian believers. Telling them that I am a Unitarian Universalist—well, first of all, they probably haven't heard of that. And second, if they ask what it is, the conversation can get awkward really fast.

So this is where my idea for today's sermon came from: My own feeling that I couldn't tell people about our church. Only recently, I started questioning that feeling, asking myself why do I feel like I shouldn't mention the church? And now, I do mention First Unitarian, both on my campus and in my neighborhood in Illinois.

In fact, as I was writing this sermon this week, I decided I had to practice what I was going to preach: I emailed three different friends of mine to invite them to join my wife and I at our church auction on November 10. These are all friends who do not attend church, but who have at various points expressed some sort of interest in the Unitarian church. I'm happy to report that one of them has already said yes!

Why don't we tell more people about our church? Perhaps it's because of a fear of imposing our faith on someone else. A fear of proselytizing. We'd rather let people find their own way to First Unitarian. If we tell them about it, if we encourage them to join us one Sunday, we are afraid that might seem too much like control, like pressuring them.

When we evangelize, we have to tell people what we have to offer. As Reverend Larry Peers said in today's reading, when we tell others about our faith, we have to test our own faith and values. We have to think about hard questions, like "Can this faith truly liberate me?" and "Can this religious community deliver grace and healing?" and "Can this engagement with Unitarian Universalism really make a difference in my life and for this world?"

A recent Pew survey* of Americans found that one in five Americans say they have no religious affiliation. They are atheist, agnostics, or "nothing in particular." This is the second largest category, after Catholics. And who are these "Nones," as they're called? They're left-leaning, they vote Democratic, they support gay marriage and environmental causes. They stopped going to church because they're turned off by the anti-gay and anti-abortion positions of most American churches. And yet, two-thirds of them believe in God, and one-fifth say they pray every day.

Doesn't this sound like a Unitarian Universalist? I personally believe that many of these people need our church—they just don't know about it yet. We owe it to them to let them know we exist, to let them know what we have to offer.

During the NPR fall fundraising drive, one of the reporters said "On NPR you get broadened awareness, stimulating conversation, and valuable perspectives on the world." That sounds like a Unitarian church!

NPR is wonderful. But isn't our church much more than NPR? Evangelizing requires us to ask those hard questions about what we are, what we do, what we offer.

What do Unitarians fear. Perhaps you'll agree that I've provided a potential answer to the question I started with. Sure, I realize that calling it "fear" is a bit extreme, but because this is the Halloween sermon, I hope you'll cut me some slack!

So, to summarize:

UUs are afraid of commitment. Yes, we have many committed members, but I mean on average, and compared to other churches.

UUs are afraid of evangelizing. And that is true of most of us, even the most committed members of this church.

This is a problem, it is holding us back from growth, from spiritual awareness, from community.

So what do we do about it? How can we change? What should we do differently?

Let's stop being afraid to tell the world that we are Unitarian Universalists. Let's start right here, right now. I want everyone to shout it out here in church! If we can't say it here, we sure as hell can't say it at the next cocktail party.

Repeat after me:

"I am a Unitarian Universalist!"

Once again:

"I am a Unitarian Universalist!"

(congregation responds)

"I love First Unitarian Church!"

(congregation responds)

"I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist!"

(congregation responds)

"Do you want to join me at church this Sunday?"

(congregation responds)

"Will you be my guest at the Fall Church auction?"

(congregation responds)

Let us live in the world without fear.

Let us proudly share our faith.

Let us spread the word that there is a spiritual community that supports each person's own unique spiritual path.

A church where you do not have to check your mind at the door.

A church that respects both science and spirituality.

A church that does not impose its beliefs on anyone.

A church for those one in five Americans who declare no religion.

A church for all of us.

*Laurie Goodstein, 2012, "Study finds that the number of Protestant Americans is in steep decline." New York Times, October 10, p. A17.